

## Ch'an Newsletter

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No. 65 March, 1988

### MIND, MATTER, AND EMPTINESS

(Lecture given by Master Sheng-yen on the Surangama Sutra, January 5, 1986)

Ananda continues to question the Buddha about the essence of seeing, and he asks how he can tell the seeing from the seen. More and more Ananda is beginning to understand what the Buddha says.

In this section of the Sutra there are three important questions asked:

1. Who or what is doing the seeing?
2. What is seen?
3. What is the relationship between the seer and the seen?

Ananda says that, as he now understands it, the person seeing and the thing seen are neither different nor the same; neither are they empty or existing. The Buddha replies, "Correct, correct." Easy to understand, is it not? It is? Well, that's the end of today's lecture...

That which can see is myself. That part of myself which does the seeing is my mind. And what constitutes "I" would seem to constitute the mind. Anything that can be seen is an object of the mind. Usually we think of ourselves as separate from any object we come into contact with. We are not the same as what we touch. But as I've said in the past, the mind does not simply lie within the body. So "I" is not exactly the same as the mind. I and mind are not exactly the same things. So things external to me are neither me nor my mind. Does the mind exist? It is neither internal nor external; neither apart from self nor apart from matter. We can also say that the mind is indeed myself and it is external phenomena.

The Buddha said that the mind is neither internal nor external; neither self nor external phenomena. Then what is the mind? Ananda has not yet discovered what it is. Nobody knows what it is? We can, however, arrive at a theoretic understanding: the mind is empty. It is emptiness.

Once we have come to this realization, it follows that the self also does not exist. It is false. It is not real. So it is with external phenomena. All of these things



are empty. But this is just theory. In daily life we see most things as real and existing, and we think of mind as self. What we mean by this is that all movements of the mind, all thoughts, reflections, what is seen and felt – these are what comprise the mind.

A deeper level of understanding sees the true mind, the unmoving mind. This is emptiness. This is the perfect mind. The shallower level experiences the world as real and emptiness as only an idea, a theory. The deeper level experiences emptiness directly.

If the mind is real, what about the external world, is that real or unreal? I've often asked, when we die do the things that we now see continue to exist? Are they still here? Yes, of course. Washington helped establish the United States. He died over 200 years ago, but America is still here. What about your world? Will it still be here when you go? How do we know that there is a world, a New York City, for example. We know because we mutually acknowledge its existence. Then consider this question: in your mind, what kind of a city is New York? What kind of a country is the United States? Perhaps that's too much to consider. Let's narrow our scope. Your husband? What kind of person is he? Your wife? What kind of person is she? And what kind of person are you? We must realize that we each see a different New York City, a different United States. A wife may have a particular view of her husband, but then again, his mother will have quite a different view of him. Many views, but only one person.

Today Mrs. Shih cooked a wonderful meal, and she chatted about how good her children are. Mr. Shih also said nice things about his kids. Nevertheless they don't see their children in exactly the same way.

What about you? What kind of person are you really? Do you know?

I met someone recently almost a year after I had last seen him. A year ago he professed to be full of self-confidence. He was bursting with ideas about the things he wanted to accomplish. But now he says, "My whole outlook has changed. The person I was when you last talked to me was really quite immature. I've grown considerably since then."

What about the world we see? Is it real? Is it the same world for all of us? No, your world is not my world. My world is not yours. My world today is different from what my world will be tomorrow. My world last year is different from my world today. When I die, my world will die with me. Why? Because the mind is not really related to this world. There is no true objectivity. There may be some views that are common to everyone, but even they, upon examination, are different. Therefore the world that we see is not real. If it were real, it would not change incessantly. Our minds and the external world? Are they the same or different?



We learn from the practice of Buddhism, or from Buddhist theory, that the mind and the external world are neither the same nor different. Here is a story to illustrate.

The story concerns Tung-shan, the first patriarch of the T'sao-tung sect, who spoke with his disciple, Yin-yen. The latter said, "The ancients say that all phenomena speak the Dharma – the Buddha, bodhisattvas, arhats, sentient and even non-sentient beings." Tung-shan replied, "Yes, I have heard that it's true. Even non-sentient beings speak the Dharma." So Yin-yen asked the patriarch, "Have you heard non-sentient beings speaking the Dharma?" Tung-shan said, "If I heard non-sentient beings speak the Dharma, you would not be able to hear me speak the Dharma." Puzzled, the disciple asked, "Who is it who can hear non-sentient beings speak the Dharma?" Finally, the patriarch replied, "Only non-sentient beings hear non-sentient beings speak the Dharma." This idea so perplexed Yin-yen that it stuck inside his head and became what is known as a "ball of doubt," which is used as a kung-an (koan) in Ch'an practice.

Yin-yen became a wandering monk, practicing meditation, living sometimes at a temple, sometimes in the woods. One day, a few years after his meeting with Tung-shan, it began to rain. Yin-yen started to ford a river, and as he waded in, he looked down and saw his reflection. In a single moment, he understood the solution to the kung-an.

Yesterday, I told this story to Karen. I said to her that there is a direct relationship between what Yin-yen saw when he looked in the water and the thought that his master put in his head many years before: that non-sentient beings hear the Dharma from non-sentient beings. What is the connection?

What is involved here is the question of whether mind and external phenomena are the same or different. Normally, we understand something when it is communicated to us through speech or some other medium. It is mind that allows us to communicate. Now, if non-sentient beings speak the Dharma, they must have minds to speak it with. If they have minds, they can't be non-sentient – they must feel and be aware. Therefore the non-sentient beings must really be sentient beings, right?

Yin-yen saw the non-sentient water, the non-sentient reflection in the water, and the non-sentient body the water reflected (the body without the mind would be non-sentient). He realized that his non-sentient reflection spoke the Dharma to his non-sentient body. Here is a case of a non-sentient being speaking the Dharma to a non-sentient being. Nevertheless, this is not a very high level of understanding in Ch'an. It is what we talk about when we say that mind and body become one, that mind and external phenomena become one. But you must go deeper than this to understand as Master Tung-shang understood.



Yin-yen had the realization that sentient and non-sentient beings are non-existent. Is this a very high level of understanding? No. The view that mind and body are the same, that self and external world are the same — this is the level of the expanded sense of self, the great "I." To see that self, mind, body, and external world are all non-existent is to reach an understanding of emptiness itself. Reach this level and stop, and you will indeed have a pessimistic outlook on the world.

Go deeper and you arrive at the level of Tung-shan and Ananda. They understand that emptiness and existence are not two different things. Neither are mind and external phenomena two different things.

Let's talk about the mind. Is there anything in it? If anything exists in the mind, it is only attachment. If there is nothing in the mind, that, too, is attachment. One extreme is the attachment to existence; the other, the attachment to emptiness. A beginning practitioner tends to attach to existence and not emptiness.

At the end of the last retreat, one of the participants brought his friend to talk to me. He said, "If Buddhism teaches that everything is empty, why bother to practice, since there seems like there's nothing to attain." I asked, "How do you know about emptiness?" He said, "I've read a little bit about Buddhism, and in every book it says that life is suffering, emptiness, impermanence, and no self exists. This is a pretty negative outlook on the world, and if that's not emptiness, I don't know what is." My reply was, "You're right, but I think you should know a little bit more about emptiness."

Emptiness can be broken down into two aspects: no-characteristics and no-desire. No-characteristics includes no birth, no death and no nirvana. No-desire includes no abiding in or departing from birth and death, no abiding in or departing from samsara. After he heard this, the friend was even more convinced that there was no need for practice: "There's no need to wish for release from birth and death because they don't exist, and there's no nirvana to attain anyway. Why practice?"

I said, "For someone with your frame of mind, it is best to talk about existence, not emptiness." He asked me, "What exists?" "Suffering," I said. He countered, "All I hear Buddhism talking about is suffering. This bothers me — I'm really opposed to this teaching. It doesn't seem reasonable. OK, there's a certain amount of suffering in everybody's life, but as far as I'm concerned, the time I don't suffer far exceeds the time that I do." I bet most of you agree with this, right?

The idea of suffering can be quite subtle. Of course, suffering includes the pain and distress that most people associate with the word. But impermanence itself is suffering. I heard some people here talking about the Radio City Christmas show. They said it was wonderful, but it lasted only 90 minutes. It seemed like it ended almost as soon as it began. Is this happiness or suffering? Most people would say



that this a kind of happiness that passes quickly. They would hope to go again sometime. But how many opportunities will there be in one lifetime? Finally, your chances to go will run out.

I asked the friend about his plans for the future. He said that he planned to do a great deal in his life, but he complained that there's not enough time to do all that he wants to do. "There were many things in the past that I wanted to do, also, but I never got around to them," he said. This, too, is suffering.

Why practice? To leave suffering. Once we leave suffering, we reach emptiness. On retreats, when people complain of the pain in their legs, I say, "It's your legs and not you that hurt. It's not your mind. Just let them hurt." Most people give up and say, "I just can't stand the pain." Then I ask, "is the pain real or illusory?" They will say it's real. I say, "No, you're wrong; it's illusory. If it's real, then give the pain to me. Hand it over." Then, they say, "As soon as I put my legs down, the pain disappears." I reply, "Therefore it's illusory. If it was true and real, then even when you put down your legs, the pain would still be there."

We must practice to understand emptiness. To try to understand emptiness without practice will almost certainly end in misunderstanding. You can read the sutras and try to understand the theory behind them, but it is doubtful that you will reach true emptiness. Emptiness is a high teaching in Buddhism, but we must understand that emptiness means not only emptiness of existence, but also the emptiness of emptiness. At this level one can truly see how positive and affirmative Buddhism really is.

A woman I know in Taiwan complained to me recently. She said that her children were giving her so much trouble that she wished she had become a nun instead of getting married. But the fact of the matter was that she was not a nun and she was married and had children. She asked, "When will these relationships with other beings end? This time I'm a mother — my creation of a child means creation of more karma. Next lifetime I will again have some relationship with the one who is my child in this lifetime. When will it all end?"

I told her that the relationship between people is real, but the suffering she feels is illusory and so is the child's lack of obedience. And if bodhisattvas didn't have other people to speak the Dharma to, they would not be able to become bodhisattvas. If the Buddha had no one to speak to, he could not have become the Buddha. If she did not have her child, she would not be able to become a bodhisattva. By having a child, she realizes how difficult it is to raise someone. And, something I emphasize for all Buddhist families, going through this gives you the opportunity to do something good for someone. You should be grateful for the opportunity. If your son or daughter reacts badly to your efforts, if he or she is not appreciative, it doesn't matter. That's their business. But the woman said, "If my life continues like this, I don't see how I can attain liberation." "It's very easy," I told her. "First, don't desire liberation. Second, don't be afraid of trouble."



Another story also illustrates this: A disciple who visited his master asked, "Will you please help me to get rid of my vexations? The master replied "Who binds you? Who has bound you?" True liberation is not sought after. True nirvana is not sought after.

Your attitude in daily life and the way you interact with your family are what are important. When you feel love and then attach to it, it is not liberation. When you feel hate and then attach to it, it is not liberation. If you want more of this and less of that, it is not liberation.

If you accept what you are given and you give freely of what you have, this is liberation. This idea of emptiness where nothing exists, where you want nothing, and where nothing makes demands of you – this is not true Mahayana Buddhism.

The other day I asked for donations. I used to be reluctant to do so. I thought, "When can I pay all these people back." Once a woman gave me \$20 and said that she would like me to give her peace of mind. I just put the money in the donation basket and hoped that the accumulated merit might bring her some contentment. If she comes again, I might say, "Why not give \$200 or \$300?"

What's the principle here? When she donates she really helps bring Buddhadharma to more people and she helps more people to practice Buddhism. Of course the result of the giving of that money may lead to peace of mind. But if I took that donation and went to see a movie, or went to Radio City Music Hall, or bought a bottle of liquor, then sooner or later I would have to pay back the donor.

Do you think that I am always calculating about how I can get more money? Do you think I look at Marla and say, "Hmm, I bet she's worth something?" Or do I think about Peter or Nagendra in terms of what good jobs they have and how much I could get from them?" I know Harry just bought a co-op. He must have money.

But the money should come through a natural process. We don't need to bother or think a great deal about it. If you think about money all the time, it is certainly not true emptiness. If you absolutely avoid money, that is also not true emptiness. Even a very serious Zen practitioner will have some money at times. Most Buddhist practitioners still work. At one point Chris didn't have a job, but now he does. Do I have a job? What is my job? I don't feel like I have a job. Whenever there's attachment to something, there's unhappiness. Avoid thinking about what you're going to get for your work. If you do not attach to what you do, nothing you do will seem like work.



## Letter from Shih-fu

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February, 1988

Dear Ch'an Center Members and Friends:

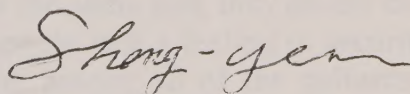
I wish everyone contentment and good fortune for the coming Spring.

I felt fine after arriving in Taipei, and I immediately became quite busy. By February, the contributions from the temple to the winter relief program for the poor had reached over 1.15 million New Taiwanese Dollars. This includes cash, rice, clothing, bedding and food. For the weekly Sunday lectures on *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, as many as four hundred people come to the Nung Ch'an Temple to attend. After the lecture, anywhere from forty to one hundred of them stay to take the Three Refuges. Every Monday I give a lecture at Tung Wu University on the Buddhism of the Sui and T'ang Dynasties. Tuesday through Friday, I give lectures on the Madyamika School and on Pure Land Buddhism at the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies. Saturday nights we have a group who gathers to recite the Buddha's name and on Sundays we have a group for sitting meditation. Anywhere from three to five hundred people come to participate in these activities.

Towards the middle of February, The Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture contributed 1 million NT\$ to the government to be used for the needy. These contributions came from all over, demonstrating that Buddhism is thriving in Taiwan. I hope you're pleased with this encouraging report.

We are holding a Ch'an retreat from February 6 to 13 at Nung Ch'an temple.

In the Dharma,



Sheng-yen

## News Items

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- We had a wonderful celebration for **Chinese New Year** on February 21. Over one hundred people came to participate in the festivity. We showed a video that consisted of interviews with Shih-fu in Taiwan, Zen retreats and temples in Japan, and Ch'an Buddhism in Taiwan. It was delightful and informative.
- We had good turnouts for our one-day sittings on March 5 and April 2.
- On March 27, we held a one-day recitation of Buddha's name. Many people participated. The recitation started at 9:00 a.m. and ended at 4:00 p.m.
- Ling-yun Shih, our "resident" artist (she lives two blocks away), gave a workshop on Chinese Brush Art on April 3. It was so well received that we scheduled a 10-week course beginning April 16 from 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. The fee is \$80.00. Anyone interested please contact the center.
- Professor Li will be lecturing on April 10 and 17 from 1:00 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.
- Rev. Jen Jin is lecturing on Sunday April 24 from 1:00 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.
- Shih-fu will be back on April 27.
- We are holding a Beginner's Meditation Class on April 30. Please register early.
- Shih-fu will be in Toronto on Saturday, May 7, where he will hold two lectures, both organized by the Toronto Buddhist Society. The morning lecture will be at the Hon-fa Buddhist Temple (Chinese only), and the afternoon lecture will be at the University of Toronto (English & Chinese). For more information, contact Paul Truong at (416) 754-4299.

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